DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 596 CG 024 414

AUTHOR Rogers, Russell R.
TITLE Student Development as Theory.
PUB DATE 19 Mar 91
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American College For related papers, see CG 024 413-416.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Higher Education; *Student Development; *Student Personnel Services; *Student Personnel Workers; *Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

Student development theory has been adopted as the guiding theoretical framework of the student affairs profession. Unfortunately this adoption has largely occurred without a critical analysis of the concept of student development as a gestalt. A case can be made that for the most part the theories of student development are logically coherent in and of themselves even though when somewhat esoterically assembled into eclectic groupings they are not necessarily coherent. In terms of the generalizability of student development theories, a number of concerns are evident which result from the changed and changing nature of today's college student population, including lack of updating; studies with small, socioeconomically homogeneous samples; and questions about the generalizability of student development theories in light of the call to celebrate diversity. Some theories are based on tautologies and are not testable. Interventions based on a particular student development theory may no longer be adequate to produce the desired change or outcome in a given student group. Student development theories have increased the understanding of individuals in the college environment and also have stimulated additional research in the field. There is a continuing question of whether specific theories apply to diverse student populations. Perhaps the most serious concern is that of eclecticism without theory and hence without logical coherence. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED348596

Student Development as Theory

Russell R. Rogers, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Graduate Program in College Student Affairs
Chairperson, Department of Human Resource Development
Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, CA

(Paper delivered at a symposium presentation, "Professional Leadership in Thought and Practice: A Critique of Student Development" at the National Convention of the American College Personnel Association in Atlanta, Georgia on March 19, 1991.)

Abstract

In recent years, student development theory has been adopted as the guiding theoretical framework of the student affairs profession. Unfortunately, however, this adoption has largely occurred without a critical analysis of the concept of student development as a gestalt or of the individual theories touted as central to understanding college students. This paper is part of a larger analysis and critique aimed at critically examining the concept of student development. Its particular focus is student development as a theory for guiding professional practice. Six elements of "good" theory are identified: logical coherence, generalizability, testability, significance, contribution to understanding, and simplicity. These elements are then used as a template for examining student development theories as a whole. The author emphasizes the need for continued analysis and refinement of individual theories as well as the theoretical basis of the student affairs profession as a whole.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Russell R. Rogers

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG024414

Introduction

It has been claimed throughout the field of college student affairs and generally accepted as "as good as it gets" that student affairs is a diverse, loosely coupled conglomerate of services and programs addressing the out-of-class needs of students. This diversity filters beyond administrative structures and daily functions into the mixture of personalities who "people" the student affairs profession and also into the theories the profession uses to guide or presumably guide its practice. In short, precise and discreet functions, terms, and guiding principles are not the hallmark of the student affairs profession.

In truth, student development theory is really a misnomer. What the field actually has are a hodgepodge of theoretical perspectives (a number of them borrowed from other disciplines) that address the psychosocial (Chickering, 1969), cognitive (Perry, 1970, 1981), and maturational development (Gould, 1972; Vaillant, 1972) of students or provide typologies of certain traits or characteristics (Myers, 1980). The field doesn't have a student development theory; rather, it has student development theories.

Given such a diverse array of theories, not to mention diverse utilization of said theories in practice (euphemistically called "eclectic"), this investigator will explore the realm of theory in the field of student development from three brief vantage points:

1) What is meant by the term "theory"?;
2) What makes "good" theory?; and
3) Given a view of "good" theory, what is the state of current student development theory/theories?

What Is Meant By the Term "Theory"?

Fundamentally, it is the domain of theory to account for what is known (facts) while pointing the way to what is unknown (giving direction to research). Hence, fruitfulness of theory lies in the unknown and the relations it envisions regarding what can be studied and observed under experimental or quasi-experimental conditions. As Don Blocher writes in his article entitled "On the Uses and Misuses of the Term Theory", a theory is

> a way of organizing what is known about some phenomenon to generate a set of inter-related, plausible, and above all, refutable propositions about what is unknown (1987, p. 67).

Further explication of the concept of theory is offered by Reynolds (1971) as he suggests three subsets or types of theory:

1) **SET-OF-LAWS THEORY**--a set of well-supported empirical generalizations of laws...which clarifies the known and envisions the unknown;

2) **AXIOMATIC THEORY**--an interrelated set of definitions, axioms, and propositions derived from axioms...which clarifies the known and envisions the unknown; and

3) **CAUSAL PROCESS THEORY**--a set of descriptions of causal processes including a definition of the conditions under which they are activated...which clarifies the known and envisions the unknown.

Thus, a theory of, or theories of, student development should provide a way of organizing what is known about students in the college environment into a set of inter-related, plausible and potentially refutable propositions that serve both to guide practice and direct research to further the field's knowledge base. Such theories should enable us to clarify what is known about college students, but also to hypothesize, test and even predict what is unknown.

What Makes A "Good" Theory ?

If one accepts the definition of theory given above, then one must move beyond vernacular, but all-too-common, uses of the term "theory" which imply vague conceptualizations, simple descriptions of events, prescriptions about desirable social behaviors, untested hypotheses of ideas (Reynolds, 1971), or "any more or less loosely strung together set of ideas or generalizations..." (Blocher, 1987, p. 67). The aim here is not to identify a "right" theory versus a "wrong" theory...but rather to underscore that the process of theory development is more that of seeking accurate descriptions of phenomena that lend themselves to plausible explanations of the unknown than of seeking truth *per se*.

In this regard, a cross-sectional review of the literature of theory assessment seems to suggest six (6) elements or "common denominators" of "good" or "better" theory (Gergin, 1969; Hardy, 1973, 1978; Schrag, 1967). These elements which include logical coherence, generalizability, testability, significance, contribution to understanding, and simplicity can serve as templates for assessing the adequacy of individual theories. Pertinent questions for determining the adequacy of theories relative to each element are listed below:

1) **Logical Coherence**--the more logical coherence the better:

- •Does the "theory" identify its basic assumptions and concepts and their interrelationships?
- •Are the assumptions valid?
- •Are the concepts used and defined in a manner consonant with accepted usage in the field?
- •Does the "theory" integrate its components into a logical whole?

2) **Generalizability (Abstractness)**--the more abstractness the better:

•Does the "theory" apply to different populations and/or settings?

3) **Testability (Empirical/Operational Adequacy)**--the more empirical adequacy the better:

•Does the "theory" include operationally defined concepts which lend themselves to observation/measurement?

•Do the operational definitions reflect the theoretical concepts?

•Can the "theory" be falsified?

4) **Significance (Predictability and Usefulness)**--the more predictability and usefulness the better:

•Does the "theory" permit predictions to be made about phenomena and, hence, lend itself to the manipulation of phenomena (which phenomena? when? how? etc.) such that desired outcomes can be achieved?

•Does the "theory" offer a basis upon which to identify actions in order to get particular outcomes...or, at the very least, increase the likelihood of getting particular outcomes? Does the "theory" clarify the actions and the particular outcomes?

NOTE: Predictability and usefulness increase with the level of theory:

Level 1: -theory providing topology

Level 2: -theory describing phenomena

Level 3 -theory explaining phenomena

Level 4: -theory predicting phenomena

Level 5: -theory enabling the control of phenomena

(Hardy, 1973)

5. **Contribution to Understanding (Heuristic Value)**--the more heuristic value the better:
   - •Does the "theory" increase understanding (i.e., describe phenomena and offer basis for insight)?
   - •Does the "theory" offer heuristic value stimulating other work in the field?
   - •How broad and complex a range of problems does the "theory" help to address or solve?
6. **Simplicity**--the more simplicity the better:
   - •Is the "theory" parsimonious (terse and pithy)?
   - •Is the "theory" as simple as possible without sacrificing its usefulness?

Given a View of "Good" Theory, What Is the State of Current Student Development Theory/Theories?

To address such a question, one might first measure each particular theory against each of the preceding six templates and assess each. However, in the interests of time and with respect for the substance of each of the theories themselves, the author will refrain from attempting to do so in the brief time allotted for this presentation. Instead, general difficulties that emerge when the theories taken as a gestalt are measured against each of the six templates will be discussed.

1. Logical Coherence

A case can be made that for the most part the theories of student development are logically coherent in and of themselves even though when somewhat esoterically assembled into eclectic groupings they are not necessarily coherent. Beyond this, several concerns are evident with regard to the logical coherence of student development theories. The first is that due to the age of the theories, some terms have changed in general, societal meaning

since their original formulation while the theoretical definitions have not been changed. The resultant ambiguity compromises much of the meaning of the concepts in their original form as well as their applicability to current situations.

Another limitation of the theories' logical coherence has to do with the relationships among concepts. Cognitive theories of development focus specifically on cognitive skills but generally fail to delineate how such skills relate to an individual's affective expression (Benjamin, 1986). In addition, most theories fail to adequately express the dynamic relationship between the person and the environment (Benjamin, 1986). As a consequence, college student affairs has found it necessary to adopt theories of person-environment interaction to explain this relationship.

Another limitation with regard to logical coherence is the failure of theorists and practitioners to adapt or alter student development theories in light of refuting evidence. For example, many of the theories maintain the assumption that development is relatively continuous (affected by past states of the individual) and that disruption at an earlier stage affects development in later stages; however, such an assumption has not been verified in recent studies (Benjamin, 1980, 1986; Finkelhor, 1984).

2. **Generalizability**

In terms of the generalizability of student development theories, a number of concerns are evident which result from the changed and changing nature of today's college student population. A number of the theories were developed in the 1960's and 1970's and have not been updated in recent years. The works of Vaillant (1977), Gould (1972), and Chickering (1969), for example, need to be replicated to ascertain their current validity. In addition, samples in some studies were small, socio-economically homogeneous and consisted of Caucasian males between the ages of 18 and 22 who, at the time

of the original studies, comprised the majority of the U.S. college population (Chickering, 1969; Kohlberg, 1981; Perry, 1970). Today, however, students are increasingly diverse in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. Further, to the extent that such students have different life histories than the students of the original samples, the generalizability of the resulting theories may be compromised and must be reassessed. Peer support and direction, for example, seem to play a far greater role (and faculty, a far lesser role) in influencing behavior and/or development than they did when many of the theories were originally developed. Further, the large numbers of older students, commuter students, and students who drop-in and drop-out of college have changed the nature of the intellectual and social experience in today's institutions of higher education. Because many student development theories are based on a different population (different time, different ethnic mix, different role of cohort group, etc.), theories need to be reexamined for current relevancy.

The issue of the generalizability of student development theories also raises an interesting question in light of the current call to "celebrate diversity". In fact, to the extent that college student affairs as a field champions the individual, it seems also to bristle at generalized treatment. On one hand, student affairs professionals seek theories which are generalizable so that they can be applied to different populations and/or settings. However, on the other hand, these same student affairs professionals seem to resent the assumption that people, places, or things are the same and hence, resent anything that fails to "celebrate" individual differences. Have we then evolved to such a point that in valuing diversity and individual differences we have implicitly and/or explicitly devalued generalizability in any form? Have we hence evolved to a position where our taken-for-granted "theory orientation" is that of atheory or anti-theory or separate theories for all? Indeed, how small a subset of students and with

what qualification of uniqueness merits and/or justifies a separate theory and invalidates the application of a generalized one?

3. **Testability**

To be both applicable to practice and provide a basis for research, theories must be testable. In other words, concepts must be operationalized so that they can be used and refined in ongoing research. Such is not the case with some student development theories to the extent that they are based on tautologies (i.e., they are non-refutable). Erikson's theory, for example, is based on the tautology of psychoanalytic theory. Furthermore, even when portions of theories are testable, it may be difficult to operationalize some of their concepts. Chickering's (1969) "freeing interpersonal relationships" presents just such a case insofar as this concept is difficult to operationalize for the purposes of measurement. Another issue in terms of testability is the changing definitions of concepts. For example, current societal definitions of the term "maturity" are different from Health's (1974) original determination. Thus, to be testable with today's students, definitions derived from student development theories must be reexamined and, where appropriate, updated. Updating of theoretical definitions also may necessitate reexamining conceptual relationships to assure that theories are current and therefore applicable to today's students.

4. **Significance**

The predictability and usefulness of student development theories for application with todays' college students also must be called into question especially in light of a number of the issues raised earlier in relation to generalizability. The life histories of the college students of the 1990's are different from those of the 1960's and 1970's. Such students are a diverse population in terms of age, ethnic background, and higher education experience--with many commuting, attending part-time, etc. Further, insofar as

choices and consequences play so critical a role in the developmental process across all theories, it stands to reason that theories need to be reexamined in light of current contingencies which have minimized and/or significantly altered the reality of consequences in today's world. In short, interventions based on a particular student development theory may no longer be adequate to produce the desired change or outcome in a given student group. Concomitantly, in developing theory-based interventions the practitioner makes the assumption that the stated developmental goals and tasks of a given theory are still viable and applicable to the broad, general population of college students. Such an assumption may be spurious at best. Further, insofar as the large majority of student development theories tend to address themselves more to processes than outcomes, they are difficult to use for either predicting outcomes or manipulating phenomena to achieve particular ends.

5. **Contribution to Understanding**

In terms of the heuristic value of student development theories, it can be argued that such theories have increased our understanding of individuals in the college environment and also have stimulated additional research in the area of student development. Nonetheless, the question remains whether such theories provide an adequate understanding of today's students and the students of the future. In order to use current student development theories, one must assume that the stated developmental goals of a particular theory are valid as well as applicable to the population of students on today's campuses. Given the populations from which the theories were developed and the increasing ethnic, gender and age diversity of today's students, the continued heuristic value of student development theories cannot be assumed.

6. **Simplicity**

The simplicity of student development theories is another area of concern. On one hand, it may be argued that individual theories such as those developed by Kohlberg (1981), Chickering (1969), and Perry (1970) are parsimonious. On the other hand, student development as a metaparadigm is confusing in the multiplicity of concepts and individual perspectives it entails. There is also the continuing question of whether specific theories apply to diverse student populations and if they fail to do so whether additional, more specific formulations are needed. The concern is that the theories may apply to such small subsets of students that their very simplicity sacrifices their usefulness.

In addition to the above concerns regarding student development theories viewed as a gestalt--and perhaps the most serious concern--is that of **eclecticism without theory**. To this point, it has been suggested that student development professionals assess the state of theory in terms of the six templates described above. This is accomplished first by reviewing each individual theory (a process well beyond the scope of this presentation) and second by reviewing the individual theories taken as a gestalt. However, in point of fact, few--if any--practitioners in the field either apply individual theories in total or in isolation or apply the theories as a complete gestalt. Rather, student affairs practitioners tend to apply an eclectic melange of theories or concepts drawn from theories which seems to indicate the need for a meta-theory worthy of measurement against the six templates. Ahh, but here's the rub--such a theory does not exist. Indeed, with an eye toward improving "professional leadership in thought and practice" (the title of this symposium program), the first line of self-improvement may well be to better scrutinize the individual student development theories the profession eclectically employs,

and thereafter, to scrutinize the "theory-base" used in the choice of its eclecticism (i.e, its meta-theory). In other words, do student affairs professionals choose their theories in a manner which is logically coherent, generalizable, testable, significant (predictable and useable), heuristically helpful and simple? To close with a rough analogy---to grind "good" theories into one's eclectic ***loaf*** without regard for a logically coherent, generalizable, etc., ***recipe*** compromises both the original theories as well as the resulting ***loaf***...if it ends up to be a ***loaf*** at all!

References

Benjamin, M. (1980). Abused as a child, abusive as a parent: Practitioners beware. In R. Volpe, M. Breton, J. Mitton (Eds.), The maltreatment of the school-aged child. Toronto, Canada: Lexington.

Benjamin, M. (1986). Development theory as a guide to policy and research: Critique and reformulation. Unpublished paper, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.

Blocher, D.H. (1987). On the uses and misuses of the term *theory*. Journal of Counseling and Development, 66, 67-68.

Chickering, A.W. (1969). Education and identity. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Finkelhor, D. (1984). Child sexual abuse: New theory and research. New York: Free Press.

Gergin, K. (1969). The psychology of behavior exchange.

Gould, R. (1972). The phases of adult life: A study in development psychology. American Journal of Psychiatry, 129, 521-531.

Hardy, M.E. (1973). Theoretical foundations for nursing. New York: MSS Information Systems.

Hardy, M.E. (1978). Perspectives on nursing theory. Advances in Nursing Science, 9, 37-48.

Heath, R. (1974). The reasonable adventurer. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Kohlberg, L. (1981). Essays on moral development, Vol 1: The philosophy of moral development: Moral stages and the idea of justice. New York: Harper & Row.

Myers, I.B. (1980). Gifts differing. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Perry, W.G. (1970). Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Perry, W.G. (1981). Cognition and ethical growth: The making of meaning. In A.W. Chickering & Associates (Eds.), The modern American college. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Reynolds, P.D. (1971). A primer in theory construction. Indianapolis: Bobbs Merril Educational Publishing.

Schrag, C. (1967). Elements of theoretical analysis in sociology. In L. Gross (Eds.), Sociological theory: Inquiries and paradigms (pp. 220-253). New York: Harper & Row.

Vaillant, G.E. (1977). Adaptation to life. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.